

"A dazzling work of ingenuity and imagination." —TÉA OBREHT

A NOVEL

ATOMIC

ANNA

RACHEL BARENBAUM

author of A BEND IN THE STARS

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At the beginning of *Atomic Anna*, Yulia and Lazar believe that “we can be anything in America.” Discuss the reasons why they buy into this and the way this belief changes for them over time. What do these characters want for themselves and for Molly?
2. The idea of assimilation is a strong thread throughout the novel and is present for every character. What effect does this assimilation have on Anna’s, Yulia’s, Molly’s, and Raisa’s lives? Discuss how the idea of assimilation is relevant in your life or in today’s landscape.
3. Throughout *Atomic Anna*, Molly and Anna both struggle with the intersections of their identities—Soviet, Jewish, and, in Molly’s and Raisa’s case, American. Describe the ways their identities are in flux or conflict with each other. Have you experienced something similar?
4. Many characters in *Atomic Anna* try to protect their loved ones through silence or by telling them lies and half-truths. Challenges then arise when their falsehoods are discovered. What do you think the novel is saying about the ways that families communicate?
5. This novel is full of complex parent-child, especially mother-daughter, relationships. Discuss the ways each generation carries the trauma of the past, the ways they pass it along, and the ways they try to undo those hurts.
6. Molly has always been drawn to the creativity of art. Meanwhile, her daughter, Raisa, finds a similar joy in the world of mathematics. Discuss the tension between the arts and sciences in *Atomic Anna*. Are there pursuits in your own life that give you a sense of freedom and purpose?
7. Compare Anna’s, Molly’s, and Raisa’s romantic relationships with Yasha, Viktor, and Daniel. What are the similarities that echo in each pairing and where do they diverge? Which ones are more manipulative than healthy?
8. Xenia’s bear necklace is a recurring image in the novel—“a bear at peace and a bear at war.” How does it relate to the story’s themes? What does the necklace mean to each of the main characters?
9. Discuss the role of intention and morality in this novel. For instance, does it matter that Anna harnesses nuclear power intending to use it for good rather than as a weapon? Do original intentions matter?
10. The characters of this novel grapple with the questions of time travel and whether just because you can change the past, does it mean you should. If you had this power, what would you do? Should anyone have the power to change the past?

A CONVERSATION WITH RACHEL BARENBAUM

What inspired you to write *Atomic Anna*?

I have always been obsessed with the question: Does intention matter? And I remember thinking about this when I first learned about the Chernobyl disaster, the day I watched the news and began to understand the enormity of the catastrophe. Nuclear power was intended for good, but in Chernobyl's case it ended up killing and destroying the lives of countless people and animals. I remember asking myself, if it was meant for good but ends up killing, is it actually good?

Similarly, I remember teachers introducing the idea of mutually assured destruction in history class and suggesting the arms race was in our best interest. But was it really? Is it really?

When I sat down to write *Atomic Anna*, I wanted my characters to ask themselves that same question. And I wanted to base it on some reality—but I love writing books with women at the center, so I imagined Chernobyl was run by a woman and came up with Anna first. In my head, she was obsessed with this central question of intention. As I started to write, the story came to life and shifted because Anna's intentions changed over time as she grew and changed. Even more, I realized Anna didn't exist alone. I found myself writing about Anna's daughter and granddaughter because even though Anna didn't intend for her decisions to affect the future of her family—they did. And that central question of intention haunts every generation.

The novel is a web of many different timelines that weave in and out of each other to create a cohesive whole. Was there a version of this book that looked very different from the book as it is now?

Yes! The very first scene I wrote is actually one of the last scenes in the book. It is the scene where Anna goes back in time to visit her mother. The first draft of the book focused on Anna and followed her closely, starting the day her mother disappeared. That first draft ended with Anna building the time machine and then taking her first jump. Once I got to the time machine, I realized that was really where I wanted to start. I cut a few hundred pages and kept writing from there.

Were there certain characters that came to you more easily and others that took a little longer to form?

Yasha took the longest to form. Anna, Molly, and Raisa came to life quickly but I have a harder time imagining male characters, and Yasha was a particularly tough one. I wanted him to be someone Anna could both truly love and hate, and it is very hard to build such strong emotions around a character.

In both *Atomic Anna* and your debut, *A Bend in the Stars*, science has played a significant role. What has drawn you to basing your fiction around scientific discoveries?

Science is a part of every aspect of our daily lives. Without science I wouldn't have the computer I'm using to type these answers, and so I can't imagine a world without characters who don't acknowledge that. Even more, I really want to highlight that women play a crucial—yet uncelebrated—role in these fields. The stories of women like Marie Curie, Lise Meitner, and Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell have always infuriated me because they are brilliant women who made massive discoveries and yet men took credit.

Some men were even awarded Nobel Prizes for what these women did. It still happens far too often. I work hard to create brilliant female characters who are doing groundbreaking work in the sciences because I want people to see women in those roles, to know that women have played and always will play important roles in science.

Also, I'm a little obsessed with relativity and the idea that time is made up. As Einstein said, there is no difference between the past, the present, and the future.

You include translations from *Pirkei Avot* throughout *Atomic Anna*. What did including these passages mean to you and mean for the novel?

Pirkei Avot is a book I have studied since 1994. I've read it in Hebrew and in English multiple times and I actually keep some of the passages posted around my office because I adore the questions it asks. It has forced me to think about my larger role in the world and what I really want to do with my life. For example, "If not now, when?" is something I ask myself and my children almost every day. Anna, Molly, and Raisa are women who think about the passages I quoted every day, too, because I wanted them to always be looking deeper, below the surface.



***Atomic Anna* covers a swath of twentieth-century history. What kind of research did you do during this writing process?**

A ton! But I'm not a sit-in-a-library kind of researcher. I read widely, many different kinds of books and magazines, and I love watching movies. Most of the research involved me seeing something that caught my eye, that I wanted to know more about, and then using that in the book. For example, the cosmic ray research station in Armenia is a real place. I read about it in the *New York Times* and couldn't get enough. I pulled up everything I could about the station, its history, and its present and knew I had to make that Anna's lair. From there I embellished the station, changed it using my imagination. Similarly, I try to pick experts' brains, to sit down and talk to them or catch them on the phone, because I need a character like Raisa to sound like an expert. That means I need to use the vocabulary, the examples, and sometimes even hand motions people in her field use. I can't just understand a math equation and have her describe it. I need to really understand how a math professor would talk about that equation and make sure Raisa uses that same mode of explanation and conduct. So I'd say I'm a field researcher, and I tried to jump into many fields to learn just enough to write *Atomic Anna*.

What advice would you give to other writers?

Write six days a week. Read seven days a week. The only way to become a better writer is by practicing and learning from others. Don't be embarrassed by what you like to read or write, either. Lots of writers tell me they think reading classics or award winners is important, and while I would never tell someone not to read Virginia Woolf or Toni Morrison, I would tell them it's more important to read something than nothing. If you can't make it through classics, then pick up something else. Even more, read widely. Read textbooks and *National Geographic*. Read graphic novels and books from authors all around the world. You never know where it might lead and what you will learn.



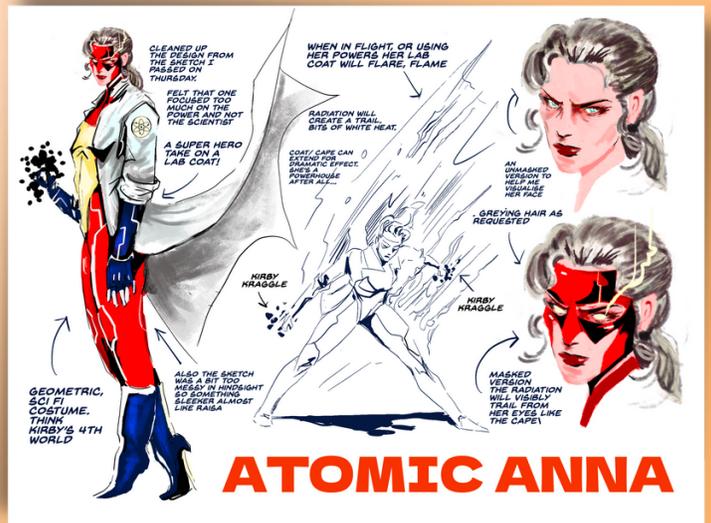
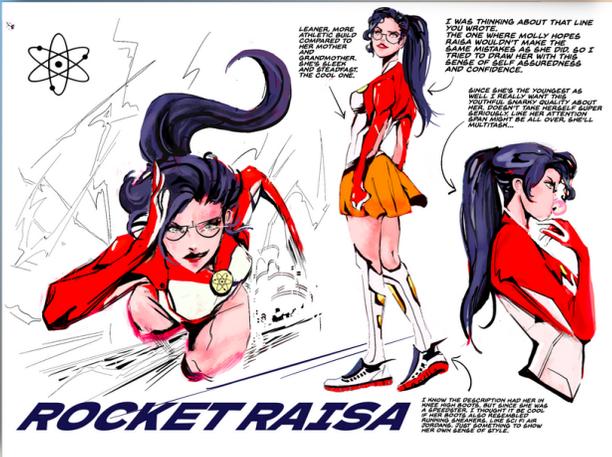
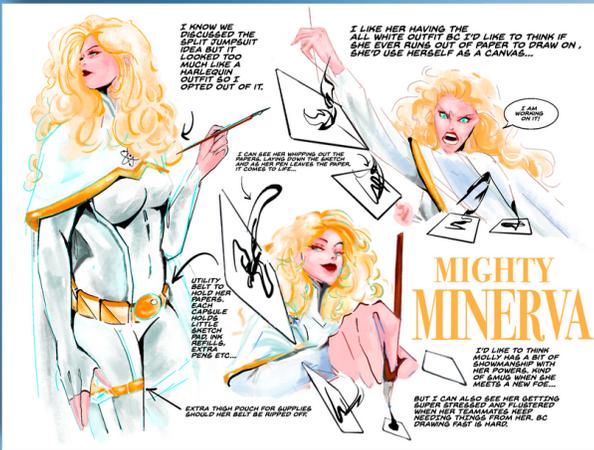
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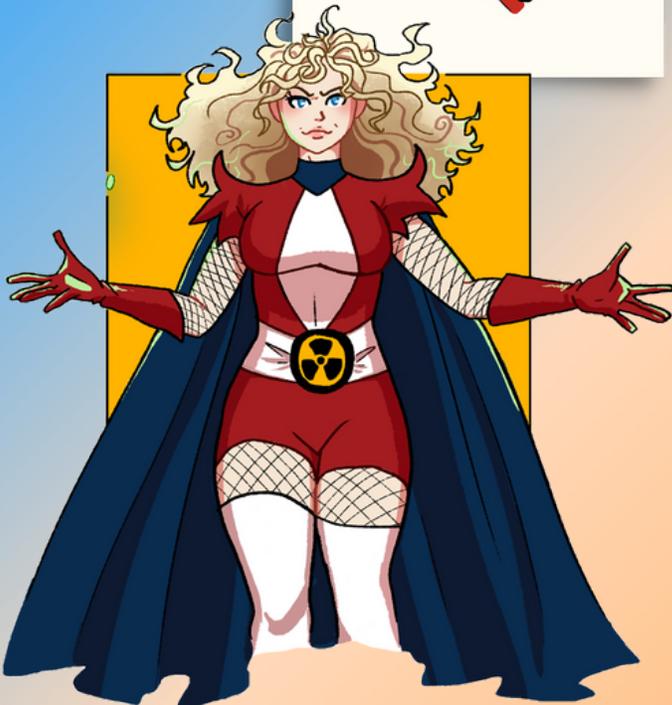
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TOP: "DANIEL," BOTTOM: "YASHA"



"The more Molly drew, the more she could escape into the Atomic Anna universe. Her comic books helped her ignore her parents, who were watching over her more closely than ever."

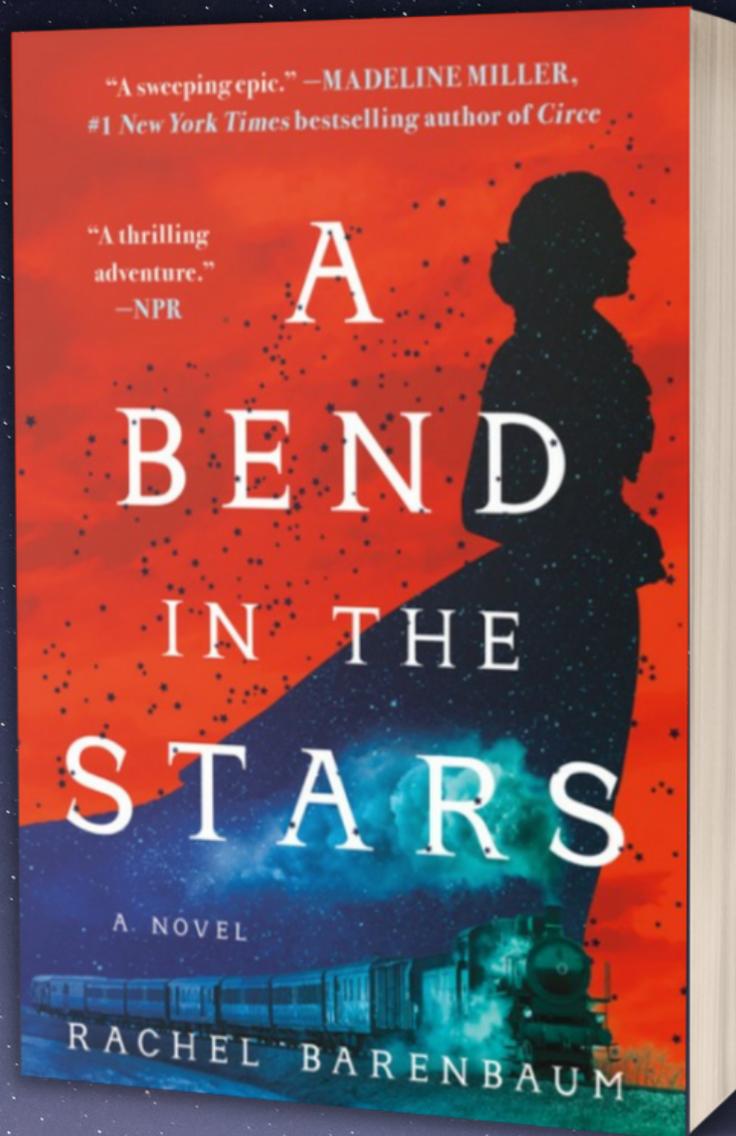


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